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UNCLAS HARARE 002322

SIPDIS

NSC FOR JENDAYI FRAZER
LONDON FOR GURNEY
PARIS FOR NEARY
NAIROBI FOR PFLAUMER

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: FORMER MDC SPOKESMAN FOUND DEAD IN PRISON

1. Former MDC spokesman and MP Learnmore Jongwe was found dead in his prison cell early in the morning of October 22. Jongwe was arrested in July for fatally stabbing his wife, and he subsequently confessed to the crime. Jongwe had been denied bail by both the High Court and Supreme Court, ostensibly for fear that he would abscond. His trial had been scheduled for November. (Note: In 2000, Jongwe won his parliamentary seat in Kuwadzana -- a high-density suburb in Harare -- with a convincing margin over his Zanu-PF opponent: 15 691 votes to 4 349. End Note.)

2. MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai released a strong press statement expressing the party's shock and regret, and saying the MDC "holds the Mugabe regime accountable for the death of Jongwe. Deaths in custody are associated with tyrannical and oppressive regimes worldwide whose aim is to eliminate opponents, silence critics and promote open fascism." The statement ends by vowing that the opposition party "will intensify the struggle for the supremacy of the people's power and sovereignty."

3. The MDC's National Youth Chairman -- and a close friend of Jongwe -- Nelson Chamisa told us that the MDC had been denied access to the prison since Jongwe's death. He said Jongwe's uncle had seen the former MDC parliamentarian at approximately 1 pm on October 21 and that he appeared to be in reasonable spirits at that time. MDC MP David Coltart told us that the party had heard unconfirmed reports that Jongwe had been taken out of his cell yesterday and returned last night, a report we also heard from other reliable sources. Coltart did not rule out suicide as a possible cause of death but encouraged the international community to call for an independent investigation and autopsy. The Director of Zimbabwe Prisons, Paradzayi Zimondi, insisted that a "full investigation" would be conducted, but the MDC is understandably reluctant to take him at his word.

4. Comment: It is unclear at this stage what may have caused Jongwe's death or whether the GOZ may have played a part in it. It is interesting that reports in the government media have failed to provide any details on the manner in which Jongwe might have died, only that he was found dead in his cell. The GOZ had been using his case to portray the MDC as a violent party, and planned to try to further discredit the opposition party by trying Jongwe at the same time as Tsvangirai's treason trial. It thus is not clear that the government would have had any motive for ordering his murder. Although the Government is determined to gain as many parliamentary seats as possible, in an effort to regain a two-thirds majority, Jongwe likely would have been convicted in November and lost his parliamentary seat in any case. The reports -- as yet unconfirmed -- that Jongwe was taken from his cell for a number of hours yesterday is troubling. Until we learn more details, however, it would be premature to speculate, but the Department may wish to consider David Coltart's suggestion that we call publicly for an independent investigation and autopsy.

JSULLIVAN